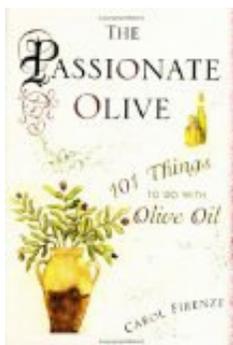


The Passionate Olive: 101 Things to Do with Olive Oil

by Carol Firenze



For more than four thousand years, the olive tree has been a symbol of abundance, peace, and longevity. Gifted by a goddess, revered by ancient cultures, and protected by emperors, the olive tree and its precious fruit have played important roles in civilization.

Dubbed "liquid gold" by Homer, olive oil has been used for food, medicine, magic, beauty, and divine rituals. Baseball star Joe DiMaggio is even said to have soaked his bat in olive oil. And while it is no longer drawn upon to treat leprosy or massage elephants, the use of this versatile product is growing by leaps and bounds around the world.

The *Passionate Olive* is the ultimate guide to this natural marvel. Along with olive legends and fascinating history, Carol Firenze shares the myriad practical uses of olive oil through the telling of her favorite family stories and by offering unique formulas and recipes.

Restore luster to your pearls ... curb your cat's hair-ball problems ... silence squeaky doors hinges ... soothe your sore throat and dry lips ... replace artery-clogging butter in your favorite dishes with ... can you guess?

The *Passionate Olive* reveals the secrets of how to enhance your life, love, and health with olive oil and merits a front-and-center spot among your most cherished books. It makes a beautiful gift, too, for just about everyone and every occasion. In fact, you and your friends will want to keep *The Passionate Olive* and a bottle of olive oil in your kitchen, your bathroom, and even your bedroom.

Olive oil ... i just love it! I always have. I adore everything about it: the color, the feel, the taste, the texture, the variety, the mystique, the smell-the possibilities. I think my love of olive oil must be hereditary. Ever since I was a child growing up in an Italian American family, olives and olive oil have fascinated me. I remember opening a can of olives, draining the liquid, and putting whole pitted olives on my fingers and popping them in my mouth sequentially and eating them with complete delight. I also reminisce about my early childhood friends being shocked at our family's use of olive oil instead of the vegetable oils used in their homes, and their surprised faces as I dipped bread into oil rather than spreading it with butter. Even then I was trying to convert people to the magical world of olive oil.

All of my ancestors came from the region of Liguria, an area of Italy known for its light, flavorful, and delicate oils. I remember savoring the exquisite tastes of my grandmothers' cooking and hearing the stories about how my grandfathers saved money for several weeks to purchase the precious oil; it was a household priority and a staple and necessary for food as well as for many other practical things.

Throughout history there have been many people who have been completely amazed by the merits of olive oil. Although treating leprosy, massaging the skin of elephants, or boiling it to pour over castle walls onto attackers may not be counted among our current everyday uses for olive oil, its uses are not only infinite but also legendary. Homer was right when he named this precious oil liquid gold and sang praises to the olive tree in his epic poems.

While most people think of olive oil mainly as a culinary condiment, people of the ancient Mediterranean burned olive oil for illumination or applied it topically to the body. From ancient times to the present, people have used it for medicine, for magic, and as part of their everyday beauty rituals. Olive oil has always been more than a basic food to the people of the Mediterranean; it's been the Mediterranean's lifeblood and has illuminated history since the beginning of humanity.

Olive oil's mystical glow has been a magical ingredient in religious and spiritual rituals and a therapeutic resource to cure ailments and diseases.

It was used to anoint kings (often poured directly on their heads), and it became a "monarch" itself when it became known as the king of all oils. In ancient Greece, athletes ritualistically smeared it all over their bodies before engaging in physical exercise, and winners were crowned with olive branch wreaths. In Rome, gladiators oiled their bodies as they prepared for competition. Celebrated physician and Father of Medicine Hippocrates recommended the use of olive oil for curing ulcers, cholera, and muscular pain. Drops were (and still are) trickled through holes in the tombs of saints to pay homage to them. Olive oil perhaps is the missing piece used in building one of the engineering wonders of the world, answering the question scholars have posed for centuries: What else could have helped ease the movement of the great stones to build the pyramids of Egypt?

The history of the olive culture mirrors the history of Western civilization. Although scholars disagree as to the actual specific location, the olive tree most likely originated in Asia Minor, probably in the Caucasus Mountains. What is known is that the first cultivated olive trees appeared around 6,000 BC in the area of Syria. They then spread to Crete, Palestine, and Israel. As much as precious petroleum oil is used as a basis for today's economy, back then the economy was based on the production and sale of grain, wine, and olive oil. As trading moved out into other regions, this commercial network spread the knowledge and cultivation to what is now Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece.

By the seventh century BC, olive trees were well established in Greece. The olive tree was considered so sacred that legislation was written to prohibit the cutting down of one. Known as Solon's Olive Protection Law, and written by the statesman, Solon, the law stated that anyone who uprooted or destroyed an olive tree would be judged in court and, if found guilty, sentenced to death. In fact, the olive culture was so highly valued and the fruit from trees considered so sacred and revered that only chaste men and virgins were authorized to pick the fruit. (I wonder what kind of workforce we could gather today based on those stringent guidelines?)

The Romans planted olive groves and extended olive cultivation throughout their ever-growing empire. They improved oil-production techniques by inventing what was to be the prototype of the modern lever press. Populations conquered by the Romans were often ordered to pay taxes in the form of olive oil. Why, you may ask? As great consumers of oil, the Romans could not feed their own citizens with local oil output (a situation that still exists in Italy today). As documented in the Museo dell'Olivio (the Carli Olive Tree Museum in Imperia, Italy), it has been estimated that adult citizens going to public gymnasiums used as much as 55 liters (14.3 gallons) of olive oil annually for personal hygiene, for consumption, as a lubricant, for lighting, for rituals, and as a medicament. That is a lot of olive oil!

The valuable oil played an important role in the development of the Mediterranean economy. Under Roman rule, the Mediterranean region was divided according to olive oil markets, and olive oil trading was as hot a commodity as was dot.com stock in its heyday. Two notable differences between the dot.com peak and the olive oil peak: First of all, according to the historian Pliny, by the first century AD, Rome had excellent oil that was sold "at reasonable prices." Second, olive oil is a trend that has lasted.

Advanced ships were built for the purpose of transporting oils a great distance. Hispania (that portion of the Roman Empire encompassing most of present-day Spain and Portugal) was the largest supplier of this precious liquid, and their olive oils were considered the holy grail of oils and thought to have the finest quality. The oil was shipped in terra-cotta amphoras (large, two-handled jars with narrow necks). Often carrying up to seventy kilos of olive oil, these amphoras could be used only once for three major reasons: olive oil permeated the porous terra-cotta causing rancidity if used again; they often became damaged during the voyage; and cleaning and recycling of the amphoras was unprofitable. The number of discarded amphoras is staggering. In fact, there is a mountain in Rome called Mt. Testaccio-forty-nine meters high and one kilometer wide-that is made entirely of methodically broken, discarded, and stacked amphoras.

The citizens of Rome and other parts of this vast empire consumed great quantities of Hispania's wonderful oil.

Even the oldest cookbook (that we know about), written by Apicius in the first century AD and entitled *De Re Coquinaria* ("On Cookery"), included many recipes using Hispania's oil.

Olive cultivation declined during the barbarian invasions. It became rare and valuable during the Middle Ages, where it was chiefly used for religious purposes. Religious orders owned a great share of the cultivated olive trees, and behind monastic walls the precious oil could be found at the tables of churchmen.

The history of olive cultivation in the New World can be traced to missionaries traveling with Spanish explorers and conquistadors who carried the olive to Mexico (New Spain), to Caribbean settlements, then to the mainland of South America (Peru, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile), and, at last, to what is now California. As early as 1524, Franciscan missionaries planted olive trees in New Spain. As they prepared for new settlements (in Baja California), they would take pot cuttings (or seeds) from existing orchards to their new outposts.

Sailing in the name of Spain, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, while not involved in olive agriculture, noted the importance of olive oil during his journey to the New World. He is said to have allotted a daily ration of a quarter liter of olive oil (about 1 cup) to each sailor aboard ship.

The early history of olive cultivation in present-day California revolves around the Franciscan fathers. During the second half of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, olive groves were established at nineteen of the twenty-one California missions, beginning with San Diego de Alcalá and ending with San Francisco Solano Mission in Sonoma. Only the missions at San Francisco and Carmel do not have suitable climates for growing olive trees.

Historically, the original purpose of growing olives in California was for the making of oil, with the first oil produced in 1803. By the mid-nineteenth century, olive oil was a thriving industry, but then it languished. Its popularity was cyclical, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, table olives became the primary products from the fruit of the tree (and still are). However, in recent years, a number of Californians are planting olive trees and harvesting the fruit to make exceptional olive oil.

Since 1985, the use of olive oil in the United States has grown exponentially with the importing of excellent European oils, the availability of award-winning California oils, the national focus on health and nutrition, and the growing interest in culinary arts. But not too many people know that the olive tree itself has always been a symbol of abundance, peace, longevity, and wisdom.

Capable of living up to three thousand years, this hardy and undemanding tree can survive semi-arid climates, shallow soil, and decapitation. Should a tree die, shoots will begin to grow from the base. Because of its immortal nature, the tree and the oil produced from it have developed magical auras and are referenced in numerous legends, stories, and myths.

Mythical, Mystical, and Legendary

The olive tree has inspired myths and legends and has enjoyed an unrivaled degree of fame (well, with perhaps the possible exception of the grapevine). It was especially lauded during the Greek, Egyptian, and Roman eras. In Greece, the history of olive oil is as old as the gods of Olympus. One Greek legend accounts for the very origin

of the olive and associates it with the founding of the city of Athens. According to the legend, a contest was held in Greece to see which god or goddess would be the patron of the new Greek city. Athena, goddess of wisdom, was challenged by Poseidon, god of the sea and horses, to provide the Greeks with the most useful, divine gift.

Poseidon produced the horse; however, Athena was chosen by Zeus as the winner of the contest because she provided the most useful gift—the olive tree—noted for its oil, fruit, and wood and as the symbol of peace, wisdom, and prosperity. Even today, an olive tree stands where the story of this legendary competition is said to have taken place. The myth lives on; it is said that all the olive trees in Athens were descended from that first olive tree offered by Athena.

Throughout Greece, competitions were held in close connection with the olive tree. The Olympic Games, held in honor of Zeus, are where Olympic athletes (massaged with olive oil) believed that wisdom, power, and strength would be bestowed upon them. It was also believed that if one polished a statue of Zeus with olive oil, he would be so honored that he would bring the statue owner a long and happy life.

In Egypt, the kingdom that worshiped its pharaohs in life as well as death, crowns of olive branches were ritually offered and placed in tombs. Olive oil, mixed with sesame and pistachio oils, was applied prior to the linen wrapping of a mummy. The ancient Egyptians, who also used olive oil for cosmetics and medicine, believed the olive tree to be a gift from the gods that would bestow beauty, power, and love to its users. They also believed that Isis, goddess of fertility and wife of Osiris, a supreme god of the Egyptians, was responsible for teaching man how to extract oil from olives.

However, always competitive, the Romans credit the olive tree and its oil to their goddess of wisdom, technical skill, and invention—Minerva—who, according to legend, gave the Romans the art of cultivating the olive tree. The legendary founders of Rome—the twins Romulus and Remus—were believed to have been born under an olive tree. Another legend attributes the wild olive tree to Hercules, who struck the ground with his mighty club, which then took root. Whatever the legends, the civilized Romans, to this day, are credited with saying: "Partes humani cultus necessariae vinum ... atque oleum olivarum"—"The necessary ingredients of civilization are wine and ... olive oil."

Moses, Christ, and Muhammad Have One Thing in Common

Olive oil occupies a central place in all of the religions associated with the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The oil has been used for lamps in temples and for anointing rituals since time immemorial. Olive oil was sacred to Moses, Christ, and Muhammad.

Olive oil is referenced more than 140 times in the Bible, and the olive tree, considered the king of all trees, is mentioned over one hundred times. In Genesis, an olive branch was returned to Noah on the ark by a dove, signaling the end of the great flood. Since then, the olive branch has been viewed as a symbol of life and peace. The greatest religious significance of olive oil is documented in the book of Exodus, where the Lord tells Moses how to make an anointing oil of spices and olive oil. The olive tree and olive oil permeates different ancient psalms and prayers, many of which are recited today, including Psalm 23:5, "... you anoint my head with oil."

For the Jewish people, having a plentiful supply of oil, along with wine, was a symbol of God's favor. Oil was, and still is, a sign of God's blessing because it represents all that is best in life and God's generosity to the people he loves.

In the Christian churches, both Western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) and Eastern (Orthodox), olive oil is the symbol of God's boundless generosity toward humankind and of his never-ending love. Christ (Christós) means the anointed one, that is, anointed with (olive) oil. When it is used to anoint people in church, it becomes one of the channels through which God's power comes into the world and by which he blesses Christians with his Holy Spirit.

Carol Firenze



Carol Firenze is a board member of the California Olive Oil Council and a professional member of the American Institute of Wine and Food and the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade. She received her Olive Oil Consultant Certificate from the Italian Culinary Institute in New York and holds a doctorate in education from the University of San Francisco, with a focus on cultural and communicative understanding. Firenze lives in Los Gatos, California, and is an international management consultant.